



Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS Reassessing the El Portal Boundary

The El Portal Administrative Site consists of about 1,139 acres located directly outside of the boundary of Yosemite National Park, near the park's westernmost entrance along State Highway 140. In 1958, Congress transferred the land to the National Park Service in order to relocate administrative facilities outside of Yosemite National Park.

But El Portal is more than an administrative site; it is also home to hundreds of residents, mostly employees serving in various positions related to the operation of the park. Its human history dates back nearly 8,000 years, and evidence of some of the Yosemite region's earliest American Indian occupation exists in El Portal. It was also the terminus of the Yosemite Valley Railroad that steamed through the Merced River canyon conveying thousands of tourists from the Central Valley to Yosemite after the turn of the century. El Portal is also rich in riverine and wetland plant species. And in terms of recreation, the El Portal reach of the Merced River is home to world-class fishing and whitewater sports. These are only a few of the reasons why the Merced was designated a Wild and Scenic River in 1987.

While the intent of the 1958 legislation remains intact in the context of Yosemite planning, any future development in the river corridor must meet the protection and enhancement mandate of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and the requirements of the Merced River Plan, as amended.

River Values in the El Portal Segment

The El Portal river boundary presented in the 2000 Merced River consisted of the 100-year floodplain or River Protection Overlay, whichever was greater. The U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals determined that in order to draw a narrow boundary, the National Park Service must determine that it was protective of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act calls "Outstandingly Remarkable Values." To ensure that the proposed boundaries were protective of these values, the park reevaluated the Outstandingly Remarkable Values presented in the in the 2000 Merced River Plan. Additional field studies and data gathering efforts were conducted to evaluate and delineate the locations of biological, cultural, and recreational values.

According to the Interagency Coordinating Council on Wild and Scenic Rivers, an Outstandingly Remarkable Value must meet the following two-pronged criteria:

1. Values must be river-related, and
2. Values must be unique or exemplary in a regional or national context.

The Outstandingly Remarkable Values for the El Portal Segment include scientific, geological processes and conditions, recreation, biological, cultural, and hydrologic processes. (For more, see pages II-4 through II-9 of the draft plan.)

Management Zoning

Once alternative boundaries were developed, park staff evaluated potential management zoning designations for areas within the boundaries. Management zoning is a tool for describing the types and levels of activities and facilities allowed within a given area. The prescriptions for each of the management zones remained consistent with those adopted in the 2000 Merced River Plan (see pages III-95 to III-105 and Appendix A).

Comparison of Boundary Alternatives

All three action alternatives meet the Court direction to redraw the boundaries based on protection of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values in the El Portal segment. For each of the alternatives:

1. All river values would be protected whether within or outside the corridor boundary.
2. Any future development within the boundary would need to comply with all requirements of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and the river management elements adopted in the 2000 Merced River Plan, as amended in 2005.
3. Future development outside the corridor would also be required to evaluate the potential for effects to Outstandingly Remarkable Values and to protect and enhance those values, regardless of their location.

The primary difference between the alternatives is the amount of acreage included within the boundary and in how management zoning is applied within the boundary.

Alternative 1 – Narrow Boundary (No Action Alternative)

Pages II-28 to II-29

- The No Action Alternative represents a baseline against which other alternatives are compared. In the No Action Alternative, the corridor boundary for the El Portal segment of the river remains as adopted in the 2000 Merced River Plan.
- The corridor is set at the River Protection Overlay or the 100-year floodplain, whichever is greater.
- The corridor would contain 193 acres, of which 56 acres are zoned for administrative uses.
- Management zoning allows for additional administrative uses north of the river and in previously disturbed areas south of the river.

Alternative 2 – Values within a Quarter-mile of the River, Flexible Zoning (Preferred Alternative)

Pages II-54 to II-55

- Under Alternative 2, the proposed El Portal boundary is drawn based specifically on the location of river values within a quarter-mile of the river.
- The corridor would contain 649 acres; of this, 219 acres would be zoned for administrative use.
- Management zoning allows for some additional administrative uses north of the river and in previously disturbed areas south of the river.

Alternative 3 – Quarter-mile Boundary, More Restrictive Zoning

Pages II-62 to II-63

- Under Alternative 3, the proposed corridor for the El Portal segment would include all areas within a quarter-mile on either side of the river within the El Portal Administrative Site.
- The corridor would contain 853 acres; of these, 399 acres would be zoned for administrative use.
- Management zoning allows for limited additional administrative uses north of the river and in previously disturbed areas south of the river.

Alternative 4 – Values within the El Portal Administrative Site, Most Restrictive Zoning

Pages II-70 to II-71

- Under Alternative 4, the proposed corridor boundary for the El Portal segment would closely follow the location of Outstandingly Remarkable Values within the El Portal Administrative Site.
- The corridor would contain 814 acres; of this, 132 acres would be zoned for administrative use.
- Management zoning allows for administrative uses only in existing developed areas north of the river and in some previously disturbed areas south of the river. Much of the area within the corridor would be zoned to restrict future development.